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World Chronicle

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HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Peter HANSEN, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, discusses international efforts to alleviate the plight of millions of refugees around the world. United Nations agencies provide emergency relief assistance to victims of local conflicts and natural disasters. Demining efforts are under way in a number of countries where land mines left from previous conflicts pose a great threat to the safety of millions of people. Mr. Hansen urges governments to ban the manufacturing and selling of these silent killers.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Following the end of the cold war, the international community is faced with the challenge of addressing an ever-increasing number of new conflicts. Unleashed by long-suppressed ethnic, religious and cultural tensions, these conflicts have forced millions of people to abandon their homes and communities and seek refuge across international borders. Man-made and natural disasters and calamities also continue to cause economic devastation and loss of lives. Is the international community prepared to respond to these challenges in a timely, coherent and effective manner?

Our guest today coordinates international emergency relief assistance. He is Peter Hansen, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. Joining me to talk with Mr. Hansen are Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia and Emiko Tate of NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation.

Mr. Hansen, welcome to World Chronicle.

HANSEN: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Under-Secretary-General, we hear a lot these days about donor fatigue — the major contributors to operations like yours, humanitarian operations, relief, et cetera, are supposed to be drying up their funding. Is this severely affecting your operations?

HANSEN: Well, there is undoubtedly donor fatigue, but that is reflected in different degrees in different areas of international activity. There's no doubt that long-term development activities have suffered much more from donor fatigue than the humanitarian crises have suffered. We are still mobilizing some $3 billion a year through our appeals for humanitarian disasters, and indeed, even though many countries have cut back on many budgets for international affairs, the humanitarian cause has suffered less than other international causes.

LITTLEJOHNS: You recently returned from an inspection tour of a number of countries, and I gather that you found a new country with a problem, or at least, as far as the general public are concerned, it's a new country with a problem — namely, Sierra Leone in West Africa. Tell us a bit about the situation there.

HANSEN: Well, the problem is really not new. The country has been undergoing an internal civil war for more than four years now, and the situation there is very grave indeed. The rebels in the country are attacking, hit and run, cities, villages, many villages in the countryside, upper and down — there's nothing left but ashes. This means that the fields

are not tilled, means that there is no food production, and it means that in that country alone there are some 1.5 million internally displaced and refugees, but very many internally displaced who are chased from their homes and have to live in camps or be absorbed as best they can in over-crowded towns and cities.

LITTLEJOHNS: And is Humanitarian Affairs doing something about that situation?

HANSEN: We are doing something about that situation in the sense that we — the World Food Programme, UNICEF and others — have been tending to health needs. We have camps for the internally displaced, and we have been trying to reach many of these isolated parts of the country with convoys of food supply. But some of these convoys have been ambushed, and it's very dangerous indeed to try to bring relief to the parts of the country where there's fighting going on.

STEELE: Given that you've had four years in a sense — and probably some years before that — if we were forecasting the political direction of the country, is the response adequate, or do you find yourself in another knee-jerk type situation where suddenly it's become so grim that the international community feels that it has to be talking about it?

HANSEN: It has lasted for four years, and indeed the international response to Sierra Leone has not been what it should have been, with the amount of suffering that is going on. ICRC, the International Red Cross, has reported about 75 per cent severe malnutrition in some parts of the country, which means that children and women, men, and everybody are at risk of their lives, and many are dying. And the total amount we have appealed for in Sierra Leone is only about $14 million, of which we have —

LITTLEJOHNS: Fourteen or four zero?

HANSEN: Fourteen, one four, million dollars, of which we have received only some 40 per cent. So that is a wholly inadequate response.

STEELE: So what will it take? Do we need another Rwanda to get people off their backsides, or what?

HANSEN: What it will take is a greater awareness that these things are going on and a greater realization that it is unacceptable to let human beings die in the numbers that people are dying in Sierra Leone. And one can only try to bring the attention of the international community to this going on, but with some 25 emergencies going on right now, it's always difficult to get the focus on the individual crises that is necessary to mobilize resources.

STEELE: Has Somalia or Rwanda made that just very much more difficult?

HANSEN: I think that Somalia certainly has not helped, because that has been a rather thankless humanitarian task, in Somalia, where now we are undergoing great difficulty again in reaching populations — continued fighting, and you've got malnutrition again rising

there. And it seems as if the international community is more hesitant to respond if they can't see light at the end of some tunnel. Take Angola now: We are getting very good response for the appeal on Angola because there is a peace agreement and there is some hope at the end that indeed the country can be brought back to some degree of normalcy. Or take Liberia, where recently there was a conference to mobilize resources for Liberia after they have now entered into their thirteenth truce: Chances are that this time, if the international community responds, it can work, and the international community is responding to Liberia.

TATE: Mr. Hansen, the effectiveness of your Department [United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs] relies on your ability to coordinate with several humanitarian and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, you don't have any enforcement power. So is the effectiveness of your role limited by the very nature of the UN system? And how do you respond to humanitarian assistance?

HANSEN: Well, you can look at it two ways. First of all, we have a decentralized system. That means we have organizations with different focuses addressing different needs and drawing upon different constituencies. That can be a strength, that there is a UNICEF with its specialty and its constituencies in countries who can mobilize support. We have a High Commissioner for Refugees who has a great deal of experience in camp management and in tending to the needs of refugees. We have a specialized agency for food, the World Food Programme, and so on. There are strengths in having these different orientations and these different constituencies, but to the degree that this leads to different analysis of the situation, or leads to different kinds of responses, there can be confusion and there can be inefficiencies. And my task and the task of my Department is to avoid that, to make sure that we have a common analysis, to come out with a joint consolidated appeal, to monitor it, and to see to it that aid is given very quickly and very efficiently and that it covers the needs and we don't get over-supply of relief items in one part of the country and under-supply in another part of the country.

TATE: But how difficult does it make your role, since you don't have any enforcement power over the other bodies?

HANSEN: Well, it doesn't make it easy; let me not pretend that it is easy all the time, but it is not as impossible as some people would sometimes think. When it comes to crises like the ones we are talking about, agencies cannot be as turf-conscious and competitive as they can in other types of activities. It would simply not be acceptable to have human suffering worsen as a result of organizational self-interest. And we really see fairly little of that. The non-governmental community, with whom we work very closely,

again are very good partners. There are 16,000 international humanitarian NGOs, so it's obviously difficult to generalize. But by and large we have —

LITTLEJOHNS: Sixteen thousand different organizations?

HANSEN: Organizations, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Really?

HANSEN: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Goodness.

HANSEN: So it's not a small group of actors.

LITTLEJOHNS: All in the humanitarian —

HANSEN: In the humanitarian field alone, yes, yes.

STEELE: Mr. Hansen, you're in the only growth area financially of the UN system at the present time, which is not necessarily a great position to be in, but there's a lot of discussion about — a lot of soul-searching about the role of the UN in humanitarian operations. And many people feel that humanitarianism, to whatever degree of finance you have, is really just a smokescreen for political inaction, that it's being used and subverted as a way of saying to the domestic constituency, "Look, we're doing the best we can", when in actual fact what we have is not a humanitarian crisis but a political crisis. Where are we heading in terms of rapid response mechanisms and other efforts to bring some real and effective action to bear on these situations?

HANSEN: Well, first of all, it's quite right to say that, unless you can prevent a number of these crises, you will be faced with impossible situations. In the late 80s we had five such complex emergencies. In the mid-90s we have as many as 20 or more. If you predict that into the future, that would be an impossible, an unthinkable world, so we do have to do more by way of prevention. But we also have to, when disaster strikes, be able to respond very, very quickly. And there's no doubt that the UN system has greatly increased its capacity to be on the spot very, very quickly and to coordinate its actions very, very early on. We have seen that in a number of crises. Angola is an excellent example; Rwanda was, despite everything that went wrong, and despite the terrible event of the genocide. When you look at the humanitarian response side, the international system has very little to be ashamed of there.

STEELE: With respect to your operation and the effectiveness of it, don't you feel personally at times that you are a smokescreen? Beyond your own power to be otherwise.

HANSEN: Well, I wouldn't say that I often feel like a smokescreen. It is quite clear that it is often easier to label a conflict as humanitarian and then just go about the relief side of it. But it is more feasible and practical often to remedy what you can remedy rather than

prevent and to avoid the other crises. When there's human suffering, I don't think there's any excuse for not reacting to it.

TATE: I wanted to ask about another subject — land mine clearance. How do you plan to convince Governments of the importance of land mine clearance and of working towards a total ban on land mines when you have countries such as Russia and China, two permanent members of the Security Council, who are the largest producers of land mines?

HANSEN: I think first of all to make everybody realize the magnitude of the problem. It is truly enormous. There might be as many as 110, 120 million land mines littering the globe. There are between 2 and 5 million new mines being laid every year. And with all our programmes, we manage to clear as many as about 110,000 a year. That means that in order to stay at the same place, with 110,000, you have to run very, very fast. A net addition of 2 million land mines a year at an average cost of $500 to clear it is alone as much as the United Nations budget, and that is what is needed, as I said, to stay in the same place. The human suffering caused by land mines is just awful, and it is devastating. If you look at countries like Afghanistan or Kampuchea or Angola, where there are millions and millions of mines, there are tens of thousands of people without arms, without legs, without eyesight, caused by these mines who were waiting there for years, decades, maybe centuries, just waiting, not telling the difference between a soldier — indeed, they kill when the war is long over.

TATE: So how do you go about convincing more Governments the importance of this?

HANSEN: Well, we have done what we have to do in terms of describing how militarily unnecessary these anti-personnel land mines are, or rather how much imbalance there is between any possible military gain and the enormous humanitarian suffering. I think in the past few years there has been a greatly growing awareness of the unacceptability of this instrument of killing and maiming, and you have seen more and more countries take action against production and export of land mines.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle** Our guest is Peter Hansen, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

TATE: On the land mines, with your limited financial ability how effective is your demining programme?

HANSEN: Within the limits of the financing, it is quite effective. Take Afghanistan, where I'm just back from and have witnessed the work in Kabul and Kandahar: We have 2,000 deminers at work, and they have, within the past year and a half or so, cleared 50 per cent of the priority areas. There are still millions of mines being left. The programmes

as such are effective as far as they go, but they don't go nearly far enough. We are not going to make a dent in this humanitarian problem unless we get a ban on their production and a ban on their use.

LITTLEJOHNS: How many mines can one person, one deminer, as you call them, remove or do whatever you do, dismantle I guess, in one day?

HANSEN: Well, a demining team of 10 or so will, with a good harvest, as it were, perhaps find and detonate as many as 8 or 10 mines. But it is extremely arduous work, extremely arduous, because these mines have been laid in areas of conflict where there is a lot of shrapnel lying around, and when you're trying to find with a metal detector a mine, it will often go off when it's just a piece of shrapnel, but that piece of shrapnel has to be treated as if it were a mine. So it's very tedious, it's almost like an archaeologist digging with a spoon or piercing with a stick centimetre by centimetre, inch by inch through the landscape, literally.

LITTLEJOHNS: Have you had a lot of casualties among the deminers?

HANSEN: We have had casualties among the deminers, yes. It is an extremely dangerous profession to be in. Sometimes when you see them digging down in a hole looking for a mine, if a mine would go off under such circumstances, they are simply ripped apart. But there are all sorts of security precautions and so on for the work, of course.

STEELE: This is one of the more grotesque aspects of war at the present time, and yet what we're doing here is really just talking around the subject. We need hard political action. What does it take for the UN to focus the world community on a problem such as this? The conference* broke up in September, October, went away promising to come back next year; meanwhile 20,000 to 30,000 civilians, many of them children, are killed and maimed every year. What does it take? And what does the UN have to do to draw the kind of responses necessary? And what would you propose as well?

HANSEN: I think it can only take mobilization of public opinion, people realizing how awful it is and how unacceptable it is, and simply make demands on their Government that you have to stop this. I was reading in the papers from my own country that when the Foreign Ministry had planned a sort of a soft approach to the conference, Parliament immediately got down on them and said, "You'd better take a strong position; ban the land mines." And that is because there has been a public campaign, there has been education, there's public moral outrage over letting this thing continue, killing and maiming blindly every day.

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* Review Conference on the Convention on Conventional Weapons, Vienna, Austria, 25 September - 13 October 1995.

STEELE: We have a corporate network here, we have automobile manufacturers, we have record recording companies, all with a stake in this phenomenal business — it's $2 or $3 a mine, anything up to $1000 to take the same mine out, and those same corporations that sell the mines are in the business of taking them out. Surely the UN could be in a position to identify, at least at a corporate level, the companies that are involved in this. The Nestle boycott throws up rather an interesting possibility, when we were dealing with breast milk, formula, and the problems that was creating in the developing countries. Is there any consideration, or is that really beyond the scope of the UN, to take such an activist position?

HANSEN: No, it is not beyond the scope of the UN, and indeed it is something we are preparing now, we are doing: The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has written into all contracts of the High Commissioner that they will not procure anything, knowingly, anything from a firm or its subsidiary that produces land mines. And I am in the process now, with the other humanitarian agencies, to initiate a study of who are the producers, and who owns them. It's not enough for a company to say, "No, we don't produce land mines" if they have an affiliate or a subsidiary in Thailand or wherever it may be who can produce and sell, and the company can write, "No, we do not, as a company, do it." We have to get through this issue in order to pinpoint the responsibility of companies and put that pressure on that is legitimate to put on.

STEELE: When do you expect to have that information?

HANSEN: We have initiated the study, and I would hope that within a matter of a few months we should be able to identify such a list where we can get the vast majority of the world producers identified and get the ownership relationships clarified.

TATE: Can you talk a little bit about what you're doing with the natural disaster reduction programmes?

HANSEN: Yes. Natural disasters, again, are a scourge that perhaps does not get as much attention as complex emergencies do, but we're living in a world that sees a steady increase in the amount and severity of natural disasters. Over the past 30 years, they have grown on an average of 6 per cent a year, and that is an increase in growth. Now, there are many reasons for this — obviously greater vulnerability for environmental reasons, greater urbanization — and much can be done by way of preparation. I am struck by the comparison you can make between the 1991 typhoon in the Bay of Bengal and the 1994 one. You will undoubtedly remember the 1991 typhoon that killed, within a matter of days, 133,000 people. The typhoon in 1994 was admittedly a little bit less area affected, and not quite as strong, but that took only 130 lives. That's a factor of 1,000, most of which is explained by the preventive measures that were taken by the Government of Bangladesh —

the communications, the community, education and training and the preparedness measures and early warning that can make such a huge difference. And in an area like the Bay of Bengal and a country like Bangladesh, we are going to see continued and worsening incidence of flooding. So it's very important to do everything you can do to prevent the human and material losses that are caused by them.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, in Iraq, thanks to economic sanctions imposed by the Security Council, we've read that there's considerable suffering among women and children and the elderly. Is your Department doing anything about that? Can it do anything about that?

HANSEN: We are having in Iraq a humanitarian assistance programme in various parts of the country. The three northern governorates are covered by UN assistance to the mainly Kurdish population there, but also in other parts of the country we do have activities and we do have programmes to lessen the pain and burden borne by the Iraqi civilian population. But again, we are very, very far from relieving that pain of innocent civilians that I wish we could.

LITTLEJOHNS: Does the existence of sanctions inhibit your operations?

HANSEN: The Sanctions Committee of the Security Council has reacted responsibly and favourably to our request to have humanitarian relief items into the country, but we still face a lot of difficulties in terms of the security situation, in terms of the funding situation. And yes, of course we could address the humanitarian needs better; the humanitarian needs would be much lower if there were no sanctions.

STEELE: Have you had any success in focusing the impact of sanctions more effectively, or prevailing upon the Security Council members to focus their sanctions more effectively?

HANSEN: There is an increasing interest in that question of sanctions now, and indeed, a number of countries have put forward their proposals that before sanctions are applied they should ask for and get a humanitarian impact statement of sanctions from the Department of Humanitarian Affairs with that very aim, of focusing them more and keeping innocent civilian damage to the lowest level possible.

LITTLEJOHNS: On the other hand, the Iraqi Government has declined to take advantage of an offer from the Security Council to sell quite a considerable amount of oil in order to pay for humanitarian assistance.

HANSEN: That's correct. They have not wanted to enter into the conditionality that would be implied by putting this money aside for humanitarian operations. And one would hope very much that the Government would be responsive to the suffering of their own people and enable us to meet these humanitarian needs.

STEELE: We're in the 50th anniversary year of the UN. Just very, very quickly looking back on that period, are we at a new low in human relations, our attitude toward strangers? Or is there any hope in the developments of the last 12 months at all that we could draw on?

HANSEN: Well, if you take that kind of a time span, indeed, if you go back to the First World War, you would see that 90 per cent of the casualties of war, the deaths of war, were soldiers and only 10 per cent were civilians. Today you have the inverse relationship. So we have grown much less civilized, if you can call anything like behaviour during war as civilized at all. With 90 per cent of the casualties these days being civilians, with violence being directed more and more against civilians, with civilians being the target of violence, we are indeed at a low point in what human beings are —

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Peter Hansen, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. He was interviewed by Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia and Emiko Tate of NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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